The Magnificent Mara

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AI ‘http://Z.AI’ was used to brainstorm Ideas

Chapter 1: Last Call

The bartender slid another whiskey across the scarred wood of O'Malley's Pub and eyed the woman at the end of the bar with a mixture of fascination and dread.

Mara Vance caught the glass without looking. She downed it in one tilt, her amber eyes tracking the television mounted above the liquor shelf. A warehouse fire blazed on the news, firefighters struggling against a wall of flame in the industrial district.

"Shame about that," the bartender muttered, wiping a glass. "They're saying it might collapse."

Mara signaled for another pour. "They'll manage."

"Wouldn't it be something, though? If you know..." He leaned closer. "If *she* showed up. Guardian. That's what they call her, right? The woman who can fly and lift buildings and all that?"

Mara snorted into her glass. "Overrated."

She was on her seventh drink. Or maybe ninth. She'd lost count somewhere around the time the memories got blurry enough to tolerate.

Three months ago, she'd been on the cover of *Time*. Two months ago, she'd held up a collapsing overpass for forty-seven minutes while rescue crews evacuated a school bus full of kids. Six weeks ago, she'd failed to save a little girl named Emma Suarez during a flash flood in Greentown. She'd been fast. But not fast enough.

The city had forgiven her immediately. Flowers piled up at her last-known landing spot. Editorials urged understanding. A therapist went on CNN to discuss hero burnout.

Mara hadn't forgiven herself. And she'd discovered that bourbon was an effective, if temporary, eraser.

Her phone buzzed. She glanced at it.

CHIEF OKONKWO: Warehouse collapse imminent. Two firefighters trapped. Third floor. We need you.

She stared at the screen until it went dark.

CHIEF OKONKWO: Mara. Please.

She shoved the phone back into her jacket pocket and nodded to the bartender.

"Another."

Chapter 2: Gravity

The problem with being nearly invulnerable was that alcohol shouldn't have worked on her at all. But Mara had learned, through what she privately called "dedicated research," that if she drank *enough*—an amount that would have killed a rhino—she could achieve a respectable buzz. And if she pushed past that, she could reach a state of numbness that quieted the screaming in her head.

She'd also learned that her body processed toxins at an accelerated rate. Which meant maintaining the numbness required constant effort.

She fished out her phone again. Okonkwo had sent a photo. Two firefighters, their faces smudged with soot. One was young, barely twenty. The other had gray at his temples and a wedding ring catching the light of a headlamp.

Don't think about it. Don't think about Emma.

Mara threw cash on the bar, stumbled off the stool, and walked unsteadily toward the back alley.

The moment she was clear of the door, she looked up at the sky. The stars blurred and doubled. She squinted, trying to merge them back into single points.

"Okay," she slurred. "Okay. Let's go."

She leaped.

The takeoff was ugly. Normally, Mara rose with the grace of a balloon released from a child's hand. Tonight, she wobbled, overcorrected, and nearly clipped a water tower. The wind hit her face, cold and sobering, and she banked hard toward the orange glow on the horizon.

The warehouse was worse than the news footage suggested. A skeletal structure of steel and flame, groaning like a wounded animal. Fire trucks ringed the perimeter. She could hear the radio chatter, the shouted commands, the crackle of burning support beams.

She could also hear two heartbeats, faint and fast, buried deep in the structure.

Mara landed on the street with a *crack* of pavement. Firefighters scattered. Chief Okonkwo, a sturdy woman with close-cropped hair and tired eyes, strode toward her.

"About damn time," Okonkwo said. Then she caught Mara's scent. "Have you been *drinking*?"

"A little," Mara said. Then, more honestly: "A lot."

Okonkwo's expression hardened. "Two of my people are in there."

"I know. I can hear them."

"Then—"

"Give me a second." Mara pressed her palm against her forehead, trying to steady the spinning world. The heat from the warehouse washed over her like a sauna. Fire couldn't burn her. Falling debris couldn't crush her. The only thing that could hurt her was already doing its work, somewhere behind her ribs.

She launched herself through the wall.

Chapter 3: Inferno

The inside of the warehouse was a nightmare of flame and collapsing infrastructure. Mara blinked through the smoke—her eyes were more resilient than a normal person's, but the thermal distortion made everything ripple and swim. The alcohol didn't help. The world tilted when it shouldn't have, and she put a hand against a steel beam to steady herself.

The beam *groaned*.

"Right," she muttered. "Gentle."

She moved deeper into the structure, following the heartbeats. The younger firefighter was on the third floor, which no longer had a functional staircase. She found him pinned under a filing cabinet that had fallen through the weakened floor above. He looked up at her through his cracked visor with an expression of pure, drunken disbelief.

"You're... you're *her*."

"I'm her," Mara confirmed. She lifted the filing cabinet with one hand and set it aside. "Can you walk?"

"I think my ankle's broken."

"Close enough." She scooped him up, tucked him against her chest like a football, and looked around. The second firefighter was below them, one floor

down, in a room that was rapidly filling with flame. She could hear his heartbeat slowing.

"Hold on," she told the young man. "We're making a detour."

She punched through the floor.

The landing was graceless. She stumbled, dropped to one knee, and the young firefighter yelped. But she was on the second floor now, and the older firefighter was there—unconscious, slumped against a desk, his oxygen mask cracked and useless.

She gathered both men against her body, wrapping her arms around them and curling her shoulders inward to create a shell of invulnerability. Then she looked up through the gap she'd made in the ceiling, through the floors above, through the roof.

"Hold your breath," she said.

She went *up*.

Chapter 4: Fallout

The paramedics took the firefighters. Both would live. The older one had smoke inhalation and a cracked femur. The younger one would be telling the story of his rescue at every bar in the city for the next decade, Mara was sure.

She stood at the edge of the scene, arms crossed, swaying slightly. The fire was still burning. She should probably help with that. She could generate enough wind with her hands to smother it, or she could simply tear the building apart and let the crews handle the pieces.

Before she could decide, a reporter appeared. Young, eager, holding a microphone like a sword.

"Guardian! Can you tell us what happened inside? Witnesses say you seemed unsteady. Were you injured? Is it true you've been—"

Mara turned and flew away.

She didn't go home. She went back to O'Malley's.

Chapter 5: The Regular

The bartender didn't bat an eye when she returned, smelling of smoke and looking like she'd been through a war. He poured her usual without being asked.

"Rough night?"

"Saved two people."

"That's good."

"Still feel like garbage."

He nodded wisely. "That's not a hero problem. That's a people problem."

She almost smiled. Almost.

The door opened behind her, letting in a gust of November air. Mara didn't turn around. She heard the footsteps approach—measured, deliberate—and felt the presence settle onto the stool beside her.

"You saved them," Chief Okonkwo said.

"You smell that?" Mara asked.

Okonkwo waited.

"Whiskey. Seven… nine whiskeys. And I flew. I *flew*, Esther. Through a burning building. Punched through two floors. Caught two men." She laughed, a brittle, ugly sound. "And I did it all *drunk*. You know what that means?"

"It means you're an alcoholic who also happens to have superpowers."

"It means I can do this *drunk*. Which means I should be able to do it sober. Which means Emma Suarez should be alive." Her voice cracked on the name. "I was *sober* that day. And I wasn't fast enough. What's the point of all this—" she gestured at herself, the absurdity of her existence "—if I can't save one little girl?"

Okonkwo was quiet for a long moment. On the television, the warehouse fire was still burning. A helicopter showed Mara's silhouette from earlier, carrying two figures out of the smoke.

"I talked to Emma's mother last week," Okonkwo said.

Mara's hand tightened on her glass.

"She asked me to tell you something. She said—" Okonkwo cleared her throat. "She said, 'Tell the lady who flies that Emma loved her. And that Emma wouldn't want her to be sad.'"

Mara stared at the rows of bottles behind the bar. The amber and gold and clear liquids that had been her only friends for weeks. She thought about the young firefighter's face, looking up at her through his cracked visor. She thought about Emma Suarez, seven years old, brown eyes, missing two front teeth, swept away by floodwater that Mara couldn't outrun.

She thought about how the glass in her hand could shatter in her grip if she wasn't careful. How she could crush steel but couldn't hold onto a little girl's hand tightly enough.

"I don't know how to stop," Mara whispered.

"I know," Okonkwo said. "But I know some people who can help."

Chapter 6: Sobriety

The rehab facility was private, funded by a donor who'd asked to remain anonymous. Mara checked herself in on a Tuesday morning, hungover and terrified.

The first week was brutal. Not physically—her body processed the withdrawal with the same efficiency it processed everything—but psychologically. Without the buffer of alcohol, the memories came rushing back. Emma. The water. The look on the mother's face.

Her counselor was a patient woman named Dr. Reyes who had apparently treated "high-profile individuals" before, though she'd never treated anyone who could bench-press a freight train.

"You use your powers as an identity," Dr. Reyes said during their third session. "And when that identity fails you—when you can't save someone—you lose yourself entirely."

"I *am* my powers."

"No. You *have* powers. You *are* a woman who is in pain. And that's something we can work with."

Mara wasn't sure she believed that. But she stayed.

She attended group therapy with a retired NFL player, a former child actress, and a surgeon who'd lost a patient and turned to vodka. They didn't know who she was—her admission was under a pseudonym—and for the first time in years, she was just Mara. Not Guardian. Not the woman who flies. Just a person, sitting in a circle, talking about her feelings.

It was awful. It was necessary.

Chapter 7: Return

Eight weeks later, Mara stood on the roof of her apartment building, looking out over the city. The air was cold and sharp. She was sober, and everything was too

clear—the lights, the sounds, the heartbeats of millions of people going about their lives below her.

Her phone buzzed.

CHIEF OKONKWO: Bus accident on the interchange. Multiple injuries. Nothing you can't handle. But only if you're ready.

Mara read the message three times. Her hands were steady. Her vision was sharp. Her head was quiet—not silent, because it would never be silent, but *manageable*.

She pocketed the phone, took a breath, and stepped off the edge.

The wind caught her, and she rose.

She was still afraid. She was still guilty. She was still the woman who hadn't been fast enough, and she would carry Emma Suarez with her for the rest of her life. But she was also the woman who had saved two firefighters in a burning warehouse while drunk out of her mind, which meant that somewhere inside her was something that refused to quit, no matter how damaged it got.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe it wasn't. But the city was below her, and someone needed help, and she was—finally, finally—ready to give it.

She flew.

She still went to meetings. Every Tuesday and Thursday, in a church basement on Eighth Street, sitting in a metal folding chair between a retired NFL player and a former child actress. She introduced herself as Mara. Just Mara.

And for the first time in a long time, that was enough.